

The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

Contents List

Did you see ...?

- *The Bookseller* – page 2
- *Museums Journal* – page 2
- *The School Librarian* – page 3
- *Youth Library Review* – page 3
- *Books for Keeps* – page 4

Equality Act 2010

- *A better way to tackle institutional racism* – page 4

LGBTQ+ issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

- Banning of LGBTQ+ books and other library materials [continued] and Protests against Drag Queen Storytimes – page 6

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

- *Arts for us all: putting culture and creativity at the heart of national renewal* – page 7
- “Contested heritage” and “Culture wars”: “CILIP, Society of Authors and SLA issue joint statement on censorship in school libraries” – page 9

Abbreviations and acronyms – page 10

Did you see ...?

***The Bookseller* [online]**

Debbie Hicks (The Reading Agency) recently published a short but important article, “Crisis intervention”¹, which looks at reading and young people, and in which she identifies, for example:

“[...] the real danger of a disconnected reading ecosystem. We’re failing young readers by not joining the policy and practice dots between schools, libraries, community services and families. Single bits of the system can’t do it alone, but working together we can make a real difference.”

Debbie also highlights what we know works, including:

- “Choice: children want agency in selecting reading material which depends on good curation, experimentation and free access to content—all of which libraries provide.
- The hook not the book: using interest pathways like sport or music can be effective in engaging children who don’t see themselves as readers.
- Representation and inclusion: it is important that children see themselves in the books they read and that content is accessible for all including children with specific reading needs.
- Activation: reluctant readers need encouragement, incentives and enrichment activities to help them into books.
- Cross-sector collaboration: when schools, libraries, local services and families work together, evidence shows an amplified impact on children’s reading engagement.
- Family focus: supporting adult literacy and family reading initiatives creates a positive ripple effect for children.
- Fun first: it’s the magic in the mix! Start with learning, and reading becomes a chore; start with fun and adventure and the learning happens by default.”

Museums Journal

The latest issue² includes:

- Simon Stephens “On the front foot”, which argues the urgent necessity (with a new Government) to advocate for the vital role that museums play [pp4-5]
- Rob Freeman “Working life” (“People” column)³, which describes work at the Royal Armouries to “develop and diversify the narratives of the

¹ Debbie Hicks “Crisis intervention”, *The Bookseller*, 17 Oct 2024, <https://www.thebookseller.com/comment/crisis-intervention>.

² *Museums Journal*, Sep/Oct 2024.

³ See: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/people/2024/10/working-life-were-adopting-an-ethical-people-centred-approach-to-community-engagement/#msdyntrid=kYzV544F4X9yYZww7SHwhJ5eBKhgmLJ3p663IufDCRM>.

museum” with a particular focus on gendered histories and the denial/erasing of LGBTQ+ history [p10]

- Axel Rüger “Response to RA exhibition about art and colonialism will help us be more inclusive”, which reflects on the RA’s “Entangled Pasts” exhibition⁴ which ran from Feb-Apr 2024 and was attended by some 81,035 people. The article asks how the RA can use this platform it now has equitably, inclusively and sustainably. [p12]
- Joe Brook “Our collection reflects the instinct to live in harmony with one another”⁵, which introduces the newly-reopened Peace Museum⁶ [p13]

The School Librarian

The Autumn issue⁷ includes:

- Chloe Blackwell, Katherine Hill and Emma Stone “Digital divides and dividing lines: starting from the family” [pp10-11], which says:

“It is often easy to assume that all young people have access to, and the skills to use, digital devices. Recent research results bust this myth and remind us of some of the common barriers to digital access” [p10]

It draws on their research into Minimum Digital Living Standards⁸.

Youth Library Review

In the latest issue⁹:

- Kelly Greenwood “Shadowing in the Shadows”, which briefly describes running Carnegie Awards shadowing sessions in a prison library [p11]
- Jake Hope “An interview with Sarah Satha from Inclusive Books for Children”, which introduces the charity and its website¹⁰. [pp23-24]

⁴ See: <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/entangled-pasts>.

⁵ See: https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2024/09/our-collection-reflects-the-instinct-to-live-in-harmony/#msdyntrid=uSn9gZZ2uc_xU8Bk2iifod5Aan6VTCbmZFHEIV-veCk.

⁶ See: <https://www.peacemuseum.org.uk/news/we-are-reopening-on-saturday-10th-august-2024/#>.

⁷ *The School Librarian*, 72 (3), Autumn 2024.

⁸ See: <https://mdls.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/MDLS-final-report-v1.11-1.pdf>.

⁹ *Youth Library Review*, 54, 2024.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.inclusivebooksforchildren.org/>. The website is well worth exploring, for example their booklists and their major report, *Excluded voices: Own Voice representation in the creation of UK children’s books published from 2014 to 2023*, <https://media.graphassets.com/HQ1rxci6Svilt0awtE91>.

Books for Keeps

The July 2024 issue¹¹ includes:

- Darren Chetty and Karen Sands-O'Connor "Beyond the Secret Garden: Palestinian people in children's books", which looks at the representation of Palestinian people in children's literature, starting with the old-fashioned (with a focus on British characters) by G A Henty and W E John ("Biggles") and then looking at some modern examples – but also highlighting the difficulties of trying to sum up the situation in Palestine/Israel in a few words and without fully acknowledging conflict [pp12-13]

Equality Act 2010

A better way to tackle institutional racism

This important new report¹² has just been published by The Alliance for Racial Justice¹³.

As the report sets out in its background section:

"Although the Equality Act was a landmark piece of legislation, issues with discrimination and inequality continue to persist in Britain today. This is in part due to a critical gap between the vision of the Equality Act and the ability for powers within the act to be implemented in practice." [p3]

It argues that one of the impacts of the Coalition Government's 'bonfire of red tape' in 2011-2012 was that:

"This began a trend towards a 'risk averse' approach by public bodies that has resulted in these bodies frequently doing the bare minimum to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) rather than strive towards becoming institutions which are actively anti-racist. There is often little consequence for the public bodies failing to meet even the bare minimum requirements. This is mainly due to the lack of meaningful and specific duties under the PSED, making it difficult to bring challenges." [p4]

¹¹ *Books for Keeps*, 267, July 2024, <https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/BfK-267-July-2024.pdf>.

¹² Meka Beresford. *A better way to tackle institutional racism*. The Alliance for Racial Justice, 2024, https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/A-better-way-to-tackle-institutional-racism-Alliance-for-Racial-Justice.pdf?utm_source=Equally+Ours+Newsletter+2024&utm_campaign=27d06da678-Newsletter+March+2+2024_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_93cf2d2bcb-27d06da678-120687778.

¹³ "The Alliance for Racial Justice is a collaborative network of organisations working across systems to eliminate racial inequality in England." [p3] It includes Action for Race Equality; Black Equity Organisation; BME National; Caribbean & African Health Network; Friends, Families and Travellers; Race Equality Foundation; Runnymede Trust; Traveller Movement.

The report recognises the progress that has been made since the introduction of the Act in 2010, but also argues that:

- The language used in the Act is too weak and fails to recognise institutional racism
- The language used around the PSED is also too weak “[...] because it does not require public bodies to take action beyond consideration.” [p5]
- The Act doesn’t really recognise intersectionality
- “There is an apparent lack of accountability within the Equality Act 2010 [...]” [p5]

The report makes 15 recommendations. These include, for example:

- “Have clear and direct language that raises no ambiguity for public authorities to hide behind.” [p13]
- “Make Equality Impact Assessments for new policies, programmes, and projects a compulsory responsibility.” [p13]
- “Allow for better protection of intersectional identities.” [p13]
- “The new government should review legal aid funding with the sight to increasing it.” [p14]
- “Strengthening the language [in the PSED] to go beyond having ‘due regard’ and require public authorities to take all practical steps to eliminate discrimination; advance equality; and foster good relationships.” [p14]
- The new Government should: “Take a public health approach to ending institutional and systemic racism. This will require an overarching governmental strategy that feeds into all governmental departments.” [p15]
- “A new government should prioritise culture change as part of an overarching strategy on achieving racial equality. This should include promoting leadership on anti-racism in the public and private sectors.” [p15]

Recommended.¹⁴

¹⁴ Source: *Equally Ours Newsletter*, 5 Sep 2024.

LGBTQ+ issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Banning of LGBTQ+ books and other library materials [continued] and Protests against Drag Queen Storytimes

“Moms for Liberty goes to war with New York school over five library books”

According to this recent article¹⁵ in the *Independent*:

“Moms for Liberty, an ultra-conservative parental rights outfit the Southern Poverty Law Center considers an extremist organization, is fighting to immediately remove five ‘obscene’ library books from an Upstate New York public school, insisting they are simply too dangerous to keep on the shelves [...]

In their petition, the ardent culture warriors claim the books expose kids to ‘obscene depictions of sexually explicit acts.’ The books in question include *People Kill People*, a YA novel by bestselling author Ellen Hopkins about the deleterious effects of gun violence; *It Ends With Us*, a romance novel by Colleen Hoover that was made into a Hollywood film starring Blake Lively; *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, a ‘memoir-manifesto’ by journalist and LGBTQ activist George M. Johnson about his struggles growing up as a gay Black man; *Red Hood* by Elana K. Arnold, a retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood* centered on female empowerment; and Julia Scheeres’ *Jesus Land: A Memoir*, a *New York Times* bestseller about the author’s unpleasant childhood experience at a fundamentalist church camp.”¹⁶

“Drag Queen Story Hour event cancelled after bomb threat”

According to an article¹⁷ in *PinkNews*:

“A Drag Queen Story Hour had to be cancelled at the weekend after officials received a bomb threat.

The event was due to take place at the public library in Somerville, Massachusetts, on Saturday (12 October).

¹⁵ Justin Rohrlich “Moms for Liberty goes to war with New York school over five library books”, *Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/book-bans-public-schools-moms-for-liberty-trump-new-york-state-b2604694.html>.

¹⁶ Source: *Public Libraries News*, 1 Sep 2024.

¹⁷ Chantelle Billson “Drag Queen Story Hour event cancelled after bomb threat”, *PinkNews*, 14 Oct 2024, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/10/14/drag-queen-story-hour-event-cancelled-after-bomb-threat/>.

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Arts for us all: putting culture and creativity at the heart of national renewal

This is a key new policy report¹⁸ from the Fabian Society. It sets the rather gloomy scene:

“The arts have had to weather the public spending cuts imposed following the 2008 financial crisis, the damage inflicted by the Covid pandemic (albeit mitigated by the Tory government’s welcome Culture Recovery Fund) together with the self-inflicted harms of Brexit. And they are now facing a full-blown crisis in local council discretionary funding, compounded by the cost of living and energy crises.” [p3]

The report takes three themes and then makes policy proposals within each.

Part 1 – Starting young: arts and culture in schools

Embedding arts and creativity in the curriculum

A commitment to high quality, regular arts and cultural education for all children must help deliver Labour’s fifth mission in government: to break down barriers to opportunity. This chapter contains several policy ideas and proposals, ranging from a Teach First for the arts to the twinning of schools with their local arts organisations.

The establishment of a National Music Education Service

Box It Up

With object-based learning and handling linked to better long-term retention of ideas and concepts, the government should require museums, galleries and other appropriate institutions to provide a loan-box scheme for primary schools.

Part 2 – The arts where we live

Arts for us all

Encountering great art and historical objects in all their extraordinary richness and diversity can be incredibly inspiring, empowering and even transformative. This policy proposes bringing art to where people are – in their homes, towns and communities – by making museum and gallery loans easier and promoting an open data policy. We also propose a culture pass for young people.

¹⁸ Alison Cole, Nathan Lloyd and Flora Dodd. *Arts for us all: putting culture and creativity at the heart of national renewal*. Fabian Society, 2024, <https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/FABPN0399-Arts-For-Us-All-WEB-050924.pdf>.

Futureproofing our heritage

Our workforce needs to be equipped with the correct skills to maintain and future-proof our heritage. We also propose educational measures to inspire the next generation to engage and value our heritage.

A new deal for libraries: books and beyond

Reinvesting in expanded library services nationally and a universal library card could provide everyone, from early years to the elderly, with an attractive multipurpose space that has culture and community, digital studios and streaming services, literacy and information at its core.

Part 3 – Paying for the arts

A full financial review and new funding models

We propose a comprehensive financial review of arts funding, not only to ensure that distribution bodies pursue the most effective strategies, but also to identify new coalitions and new approaches. This section contains several proposals, ranging from a government review of Arts Council England to the creation of a ‘smart fund’.

Introducing a city tourism charge

A key new funding source for the sector could be achieved by formally granting metro mayors the power to implement a ‘progressive city tourism charge’ on hotels and tourist accommodation in England. This would be locally administered and distributed to support cultural infrastructure and cultural place-making.

A talent ‘pipeline’ fund

Generous fiscal incentives for the creative industries should come with strings attached, with a small share of the tax relief cultural industries receive invested in a new skills and talent ‘pipeline’ fund. This policy could help ensure that government commits to maintaining/increasing such incentives, envisaging a ‘virtuous circle’ approach, with commercial growth feeding back to the grassroots.

A closer relationship with Europe

Britain’s relationship with Europe is fundamental to our future cultural prosperity. We welcome the government’s intention to look afresh at the post-Brexit arrangements. Resetting that relationship for the arts, including rejoining Creative Europe and establishing a visa waiver arrangement, would have a profound impact. [Taken from pp5-6]

In terms of the proposals for developing public libraries, this report contains some strong recommendations, eg:

“A trailblazer scheme focusing on Manchester’s libraries with the cooperation of Manchester mayor Andy Burnham. This would require a ballpark investment of £10m raised via private finance match-funded with a dedicated National Lottery strand via the Community Fund [...] It would finance both the proposed regeneration of infrastructure and the establishment of a partnership consortium.” [p30]

However, it also shies away from a real recognition of the role that libraries play in contributing to social justice. In addition, I completely agree that technology is vital:

“Technology must be at the heart of renewing libraries and expanding access to learning, culture and literacy, in all media, to all.” [p30]

but there is so much more that libraries offer/could offer.

Overall, this is an interesting and important initiative, especially at a moment when there is such a difficult discussion to be had about cuts, austerity and continued funding.¹⁹

“Contested heritage” and “Culture wars”

“CILIP, Society of Authors and SLA issue joint statement on censorship in school libraries”

This important statement²⁰ includes:

“We strongly believe that librarians and library staff should be empowered to stock diverse and inclusive library collections to enrich children’s educations. This involves stocking materials with differing viewpoints, so that learners may understand the feelings and experiences of others as well as develop, with guidance and support, the practice of critical reading and thinking. Collections must also reflect the many religious, ethnic and cultural groups in our society, to celebrate their contribution to our national heritage and identity, so that all children can see themselves represented and have the same opportunity to engage with and benefit from literature.

It is equally important that school libraries continue to host authors from diverse backgrounds for school visits. As well as reading books, opportunities to actually meet and hear directly from different people are crucial to developing empathy and understanding. Research by the National Literacy Trust has shown that author visits have a positive impact on reading habits, and are an important way for authors to support children [...]

¹⁹ Source: *Heritage Update*, 528, 3 Oct 2024.

²⁰ “CILIP, Society of Authors and SLA issue joint statement on censorship in school libraries”, CILIP, 2024, <https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/news.asp?id=681262>.

Censorship, especially when it leads to a culture of fear and self-censorship, is a threat to children's freedom to read, learn, question, and access information. These principles of intellectual freedom underpin our democracy. In times of growing mis/dis-information and polarised views, it is vital that we protect intellectual freedom by allowing a multiplicity of voices, as this is the best way to ensure society is strong and cohesive well into the future.

We have seen how divisive this issue can be when censorship becomes more widespread and creeps into legislation. The best solution is always dialogue between schools and their communities, informed by the suitable expertise.”

Abbreviations and acronyms

PSED = Public Sector Equality Duty

RA = Royal Academy

SLA = School Library Association

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